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# Rome News-Tribune

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## PCBs headed to Alabama burial site

**By Kevin Bowen, Rome News-Tribune Staff Writer**

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EMELLE, Ala. — On gentle afternoons, Emelle plays the role of the dreamy small town where only a fleet of buzzing lawnmowers shakes the breezy silence.

But up Alabama Highway 17, past the still brush and the grazing horses, trucks carrying 20 tons of hazardous cargo each rumble in and out of the Waste Management Emelle treatment facility.

The fenced-off grounds serve as the burial site for some of the nation's worst pollutants, including PCB concentrations from Rome that shoot as high as 100,000 parts per million.

"We've seen it from 50 parts per million to higher than what you're talking about here," said Rodger Henson, Waste Management area manager. "As far as PCB concentrations go, it's nothing new to us."

Inside the spare confines of the area an hour west of Tuscaloosa is something that looks like the first colony on the moon.

A cluster of rocket-shaped water storage tanks stands near the center of the complex, designed to store the rainwater runoff that falls into the open landfill cells.

In the northeast corner, a group of trucks line up three-deep to unload their charge at landfill cell 22-1. Drivers circle to the rear of the trucks, decked out in white Tyvek protective body suits that catch the sun.

Nearby, earthmovers preparing cell 22-3 dig 100 feet into the moon-gray sand.

The Emelle landfill and treatment plant, about 240 miles from Rome, is one of only a few of its kind and one of the largest facilities in the world. It is the choice destination for heavy



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The Rome Braves begin a best-of-five league championship series with the Lake County (Ohio) Captains on Monday. How will it all end?

Braves win! ☐ 54%  
 Braves win! ☐ 54%  
 Braves win! ☐ 54%  
 Lake County takes the SAL crown. ☐ 46%

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clusters of PCBs.

Classified by the federal Environmental Protection Agency as probable human carcinogens, PCBs were used in the manufacture of medium transformers at General Electric's Rome plant from 1953 to 1977.

The high concentrations of PCBs that leaked from the plant into the soil of Redmond Circle, some contaminated to levels exceeding 100,000 parts per million, will go to this remote outpost.

## GRAVEYARD FOR PCBs

PCBs come in many forms, from liquids swishing inside worn transformers to pollutants mixed in soil.

The liquids are removed and incinerated. The solids end up in the landfill cells, of which the current operating cell, 22-1, is slowly filling.

Each cell stretches across 20 acres and is divided into four sections.

There are 21 capped cells at the site spread across 550 acres. The entire facility has a total of 2,700 acres, meaning there's plenty of room left.

A quarter-inch-thick plastic liner stretches across the bottom of each cell. When the cell is completed, an additional liner and a grass cap go on top. The result is a 40-foot high grassy mound.

What makes the site well-suited for hazardous waste is the 700 feet of thick chalk between the cells and the groundwater.

The license permits handling PCBs at a concentration of 50 parts per million and upward, well in excess of Georgia's reporting limit of 1.55 ppm. Some of the soil in the Redmond Circle Corridor, which goes as high as 100,000 ppm, easily fits the description.

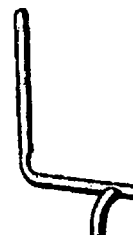
## SAFETY CHECKS

While there remains some debate about the danger posed by PCBs, "we operate on the assumption that everything that comes in here is hazardous," Henson said.

"As far as toxicity, you can believe whatever report you want to believe," Henson added.

Henson said the major problem is PCBs' persistence in the environment, since "they don't break down."

Employees working with toxic drums must wear protective gear —



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a hard hat, a face shield, a full-body Tyvek suit, protective gloves and steel-toed shoes.

Landfill workers wear the same, except protective glasses replace the face shield.

Employees who handle toxics also get regular physicals and blood tests.

The company also maintains two off-site wells — that go deep into the aquifer — and conducts testing of the wells twice yearly.

Two inspectors run through the entire facility daily, checking everything from the pits to the fence.

The inspections will continue forever, Henson said, as part of the closure plan that will start once the facility closes.

#### HOW IT BEGAN

In 1973, the EPA put together a list of potential sites for handling hazardous waste throughout the United States that included Sumter County, Ala.

The facility was built in 1977 as the dream of two entrepreneurs, who shortly sold it to Waste Management Corp.

The timing of the purchase was well-suited, as the next decade witnessed a boom in hazardous waste. At one time, the facility was the largest-volume hazardous waste facility in the world. PCBs were one of the chief pollutants.

"We saw a peak of PCB activity in the late '80s and early '90s," Henson said. "But the peak is gone."

Henson said General Electric is a good and responsible customer, adding that he doesn't know how much waste the plant has taken from GE.

"I wouldn't tell you if I knew, but I don't know," Henson said.

GE Rome Manager Richard Lester said the company has shipped the PCBs there since the 1970s. GE also sends sludge removed from the groundwater from its on-site pump-and-treat system.

"They're not the only people in the business, but they happen to be the closest for us," Lester said.

The load of hazardous waste coming to the dump peaked in the late 1980s at 800,000 tons, according to an Associated Press report.

Facing public pressure, Alabama levied a \$51-per-ton tax on

hazardous waste storage in 1991, which slowed traffic, according to the report. By 2000, the annual load was reduced to 120,000 tons.

So where there used to be 100 trucks a day running through the gates, nowadays there are only 20 to 25, Henson said.

Still, PCBs remain in the top five of the hundreds of pollutants at Emelle, Henson said.

#### CONCERNED NEIGHBORS

While the facility has taken measures to ensure safety, some in the community have never felt secure.

Gregor Smith, whose property rubs the fence, said she lives with the "constant worry of living next to the largest hazardous waste dump in the United States.

"It does concern me, and it has since it opened in 1976," Smith said.

In the past, Smith has worked with groups opposing the facility, such as Alabamians for a Clean Environment. ACE defeated a plan to install an incinerator there in the late 1980s.

Smith said that even with poor hearing, she can still hear the beeping of the trucks as they reverse. In the past, she has smelled the waste, she said.

She worries that the plastic containers won't hold forever and waste will leak into the groundwater. "If it were to pollute the water, it wouldn't be worth any of the taxes," Smith said.

Sumter County Commissioner Aubrey Ellis said he knows of no health hazard caused by the facility.

"I have never known of any situation where people are running around glowing in the dark or cows are turning green," he said.

The facility remains an economic engine for the community, but the goose has stopped laying golden eggs, Ellis said.

Tax revenue to the state peaked at \$35 million in 1991, but that dropped to \$1.5 million by 1999, according to an AP story.

The Emelle facility also has seen battles over "environmental racism," the belief that toxic waste dumps disproportionately wind up in poor, minority areas.

In the 2000 U.S. census, Sumter County's population was 73 percent black. Its median household income fell at \$18,911, compared with \$34,135 statewide.

Henson said the facility has had flare-ups with its neighbors but that relations have been good for a while. "Nowadays things are very, very quiet."

Despite the tons of toxic waste buried so near his home, Henson said, he is comfortable living and working side-by-side with so much toxic waste.

"I've been here or at other facilities like it for 35 years." Henson said. "I raised two of my children in this county."

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